

A Season of Becoming

*Restoring and being restored for the
transformation of the church and world*



A daily Lenten devotional from Reconciling Ministries Network

Introduction

A Season of Becoming is a spiritual resource written by 47 different individuals from across the Reconciling Network.

In the season of Lent, we are invited into a period of self-reflection, preparation, and spiritual growth as we engage in the holy work of becoming. The Spirit moves through this season to free us from that which binds our growth as we are drawn more deeply into the truth of who we are, into the possibilities of who we can become, and of the justice we are called to seek together.

Reconciling Ministries Network hopes this daily devotional will offer you spiritual nourishment and restoration as we prepare our hearts for General Conference this May where the global denomination will meet to make choices about who we are going to be as a church for the next four years.

Each author has reflected on scripture based on the lectionary for year C. We encourage all readers to enjoy the poems, prayers, and stories of our authors alongside the Holy Wisdom of scripture according to the referenced passage for the day.

May God bless your journey this Lenten season and may Christ be your guide as you open your heart, mind, and soul to the Spirit's work in you.

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Ash Wednesday

Text: Psalm 51:1-17

Ash Wednesday. A mark of the cross on my forehead: a sign that I am broken, that I need mercy. How counter-cultural! Our society is all about blame, rancor, and judgment. But on Ash Wednesday we aren't asked to stand at the altar and cast stones at anybody else. Each desperate, broken person humbly asks for mercy.

Which is the one prayer that is answered before it is even uttered. Pope Francis declared 2016 as the Year of Mercy. Every year, every minute is all mercy in the heart of God.

Ash Wednesday reminds me of that silly game where a sticky note is stuck on your forehead with a famous person's name. You hear clues from other players and try to guess who you are. The ashes are a note: God's lovely mercy defines you. You aren't a consumer, a laborer, a genius or a failure. You are God's precious child with an eternal destiny. You are branded with God's mercy.

If you give up something for Lent, give up your stony belief you have to prove yourself, you have to be good enough – and give up merciless, judgmental, fearful, anxious thoughts about others. Embrace mercy. Trust God's tender kindness. Be merciful this Lent.

Marked by ashes of brokenness and mercy, you see the other, not as strange or to be feared. You see mercy all over her. You find the way to be the mercy of God to him.

I like it that, after the service is over and I'm downtown, or at the store, someone stares quizzically. Oops, I forgot! – but the mark lingers. The mercy sticks, and maybe, hopefully, someone notices something different about me. After all, he's broken too. She needs the mercy. There's as much mercy as the earth has dust. It's all around.

Rev. James C. Howell

James is senior pastor of Myers Park UMC in Charlotte, NC, adjunct professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School, author of 16 books, husband, and father of three.

Thursday, February 11

Text: Acts 7:30-34

Moses' encounter with God was groundbreaking. Everything changed. And nothing changed.

When Moses met God in the wilderness, God shattered the notion God was confined to certain places. Until then, God's people believed the temples in which the priests of the day ministered barefoot were holy ground.

God is with us always. All is holy ground.

Jesus' incarnation was groundbreaking. Everything changed. And nothing changed.

As Frederick Buechener writes, "[The] incarnation means that all ground is holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it."

God is with us always. All is holy ground.

Last summer, I had the privilege of joining the Reverend Benjamin David Hutchison and Monty Hutchison, in holy matrimony. Because they were forbidden from declaring their covenantal love to one another in the presence of the Holy One at the altar of Cassopolis UMC, the ceremony took place in the heat of the July sun on the concrete steps of the Cass County Courthouse. A throng of Jesus followers bore witness to this sacred event.

God was surely with us. It, too, was holy ground.

Imagine how transformed the world will be when each of us acts as if we are standing in God's presence on holy ground. Always. Living rooms in which we share our deepest truths and longings with families, keyboards on which we tell our stories, courtrooms from which groundbreaking decisions flow, even the ground in which Flint water lines are laid.

All is holy ground.

God, Gently nudge me - repeatedly, when necessary - to remember I am standing in Your presence on holy ground. Always. Remove the sandals that adorn my fears and serve as barriers to receiving and extending Your abundant grace to all uniquely and perfectly created-by-You beings. Without exception.

Ginny Mikita

Ginny is an active member of Courtland-Oakfield UMC and a certified candidate for ordination in The UMC. A 1991 graduate of Notre Dame Law School, she and her husband, Bob Kruse, have their own law practice and represent the voiceless - neglected/abused and refugee children, animals and incapacitated adults. They have two children, 19 year old Spencer and 15 year old Greta, and a black lab/beagle mix named Kadie.

Friday, February 12

Text: Acts 7:35-42

I first came to seminary as a lay person on sabbatical ... an algebra teacher among future pastors. For me, it was a season of becoming - it would lead to a call to ministry and a return as an MDiv student.

Seminary orientation brought a friendly ice-breaker: write down a Bible character that we would hope to emulate and tell why. Many different women and men were chosen. The musings were thoughtful. However, no one chose Stephen...

It seems Stephen was full of grace, had an irresistible wisdom and Spirit. He brought many people into the new church. He was a transformational wonder! Isn't this what we aspire to be? But no one chooses to be Stephen.

In today's scripture, false witness had been hurled at Stephen. Rather than stay safe, he responds by reminding the council that Moses himself was rejected - a golden calf would be their idol. Then Stephen insinuated his accusers' guilt and the council raged.

Yet, as the persecution of Stephen intensified, the Spirit was always evident.

As faithful lesbian, gay, bi, and queer United Methodists, many of us ordained, we offer our ministry. The Spirit is evident in our joy and hope in God, in the grace and peace in our communities. Yet we have suffered a terrible false witness - *"incompatible with Christian teaching."*

We know if we tell the truth, we will be punished. It is hard. We don't choose to be Stephen. We would rather enjoy popularity among the people who love Jesus than be persecuted by those who worship the golden calf. Lent is an invitation to focus on God even during the persecution. Let us be like Stephen and bask in the Holy Spirit-our Advocate, the Spirit of truth, and one who will remind us of all that Jesus taught. (John 14)

Sue Laurie, MDiv

Sue is married to Julie Bruno and they are most grateful for their shared journey - both their faith journey and National Park vacations.

Saturday, February 13

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Many of us are familiar with this scriptural prose from Pete Seeger's 1950s song "Turn! Turn! Turn!" Becoming an international hit in 1965 when it was covered by the band The Byrds, only the line, "*Turn, turn, turn*" and the closing line, "*a time of peace, I swear it's not too late*" were written by Seeger himself. The rest are lifted from lines often ascribed to King Solomon. Seeger employed them in a time of war as a way of calling for peace.

The text waxes philosophically that there is a time for everything. Some translations use "every matter," while others use "every purpose." Too often these verses are used to support a theology that if something has come to pass, or failed to come to pass, it is because it is or is not on God's schedule. Still others contend that it supports the view that God has a purpose for all that occurs "under heaven." I do not believe that.

Jesus shows us that God has no purpose for injustice nor oppression, for inhospitality nor exploitation or violence. God does, however, have time for each of these matters and calls each of us to do the work of turning; turning from exclusion to inclusion, from oppression to freedom, from discrimination to equality, from greed to generosity, from injustice to justice, from discriminating against God's LGBTQ children in The United Methodist Church and the world. It is Time!

Like many of you, I've been involved in RMN for decades. I recently came across a poem by Marge Piercy I found hopeful. For those of you who find yourself described herein, I am grateful.

*"I love people who harness them- selves, an ox to a heavy cart,
Who like water buffalo, with massive patience,
Who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
Who do what has to be done, again and again."*

Bonnie Beckonchrist

Bonnie, a retired pastor, has not retired from life nor her commitment to RMN.

Sunday, February 14

Text: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

As I child, one of my favorite games was hide-and-go-seek because it required creativity, agility and speed. When we played near my godmother's home there were several good hiding places and plenty of room to run when trying to avoid being apprehended by the chasers.

I recall that although I was hiding, I was never alone and I never felt alone. Knowing others were around was my refuge. Knowing someone was always looking for me and would eventually find me were sources of comfort.

As we consider this in a spiritual context, it is the game we play with God when we try to pretend to be something that we are not and when we appear or pretend to be on cloud nine, when somewhere near Hades is where most of our mail is delivered.

God knows when we are hiding, yet God protects our lives and the plans God has for us. God knows where we are at all times and God pursues us with love and grace. When it seems no one is looking for you and no one sees you for who you really are, it may help to remember the game is not over until everyone is either found or makes it to home base. So, during this Lenten Season, you may choose to remain hidden or you may express courage to come out and race for safety. Regardless, the game is not over until everyone is either found or makes it to home base.

It seems those early evening games of hide-and-go-seek have helped me to appreciate the love and life that God provides. No matter how good my hiding place may be, it is nowhere near as safe as the shelter of the Almighty, which trumps the mulberry bushes behind my godmother's house.

Rev. Cedrick Bridgforth

Cedrick is Black Methodists for Church Renewal Board Chairperson and Lead Pastor of Santa Ana United Methodist Church in the California-Pacific Annual Conference.

Monday, February 15

Text: 1 John 2:1-16

What does it mean to walk just as Jesus Christ walked?

To advocate with and on behalf of those
who cannot/will not/do not yet know the way
to advocate for themselves

To know the way of humility and grace

To face oneself and to face God

Again and again

To know and be known by God

To be God's chosen ones

Without qualification or exclusion because God has willed it to be

To not sin and reach perfection

Moving beyond the platitudes to

Just love—simply loving and loving justly

To try and to fail and to try

Again and again

To resist fear

Racism, “bootstrap pulling” ethics, greed, the atrophy of our
humanity, the inclination toward indifference

To love as Jesus loved

What does it mean?

Sharing company with the child of God who is a tax collector, and the child of God who is a thief, and the child of God with a bleeding issue,

The child of God with HIV, the child of God whose religion is held prisoner by shame, trepidation, culture, privilege

Unable to perceive what God truly requires

And see oneself in them

And see that God has loved them

To love as Jesus loved

the people seeking refuge (as he himself was once)

And the people who are without home (as he himself was once)

And the people who are despised and misjudged (as he
himself was once)

To see people—not defining them by their condition

To love those acting as enemies of good

enough to hold them accountable

And to chastise a friend who tells a xeno-/islamo-/homo-/trans-phobic joke

Or who is asleep—unable/unwilling to see power and principalities at war

To love

countering the culture even to the point of death

And live

Elyse Ambrose

Elyse is a Ph.D. student in Christian Social Ethics at the Drew Theological School, and a candidate for ordained ministry as a deacon in The United Methodist Church.

Tuesday, February 16

Text: 2 Peter 2:4-21

When I first read today's passage, my thoughts were "Wow, that's not uplifting at all."

After some digging, the history of the passage provided historical insight which allowed for connection to the queer struggle in The UMC today.

Written as a rebuke towards those who rejected the Second Coming of Christ, this Lenten passage is a forewarning of the ways history has not shown favor to those who hold such disbelief. This issue was of extreme importance to early communities whose hope was built around Christ's literal return.

While most United Methodists today don't talk often about the return of Christ in such urgency, there is much talk about the sacred worth of one another, and that includes all members. If we are to believe that Christ lives in each of us, then we experience the coming of Christ each day. To deny that presence in queer members is to deny the coming of Christ in our world that is made available for everyone.

When I joined The United Methodist Church I was asked the question, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

I think that question needs to be asked for General Conference 2016.

To resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, meaning humbly examining the denial of Christ's full presence, love, and affirmation of queer persons.

Let us pray for our delegates-that the love of Christ which comes again and again will fill their hearts, and true healing will take place in the church.

Nicole King

Nicole attends Grace UMC, has a passion for the arts and racial justice, and is pursuing her Masters degree in Social Justice and Theology.

Wednesday, February 17

Text: Luke 21:34

As a kid, I had chronic inflammation of my lower intestine. Flare-ups, as random as they were frequent, would cause searing pain to suddenly spread through the lower half of my body, effectively crippling me. In those times, it was extremely difficult to remember what it felt like to be without pain.

However, over time I found a way out of despair when my body was weakened - I concentrated on locating the source of the pain. After an intense moment of focus, I would imagine the epicenter of the pain simply going away - disappearing as rapidly as it had descended. After I did this, I always felt better.

As musical artist Audrey Assad reflected: "There is a reason we call it 'the weary world' in the old Christmas hymn. Fighting injustice and evil is utterly exhausting—but it is the worthiest fight in this life. Do not give up. You are strengthened and sustained by a power that is not your own, and it is the power that created each soul for whose liberation and salvation you fight."

Luckily, it is not by own power that we fight this fight, and it is not by ourselves. It is not only easy to feel burdened by the weight of the world, it is expected. To be restored, we must locate the epicenter of the pain and weariness in our lives, and release it from our spirit, by laying our burdens at the feet of the one who strengthens us.

Give thanks for a God who will bear our crosses, so we can bear the crosses of others.

Erica West

Erica is a college student at the College of William & Mary and she urges you all to consider this question: "If theology can be used to oppress us, why can't theology be made to liberate, dignify, and renew us?"

Thursday, February 18

Text: Phillipians 3:2-12

Years of professional dedication and networking led to a job offer from a Fortune 500 company. I took the job with little hesitation. Looking back, I admit that position was a point of personal pride. I felt it made me special or more significant somehow. Perhaps it was something of an idol.

Though the work was generally fulfilling, over time something in me started to die. The decision to resign was difficult. Explaining the decision to my peers was nearly impossible. "This is a great job. How can you quit? You're not getting an MBA? Are they going to pay you to go to school? But you're a single dad...how will you provide for your son? How will you pay your bills? What will you do when you graduate? Aren't you afraid?" There were dozens of great questions and I had very few answers. None of the answers I had seemed sufficient. I could only say that I felt a deep sense of calling, and it was time to let go. I would soon begin my seminary journey.

One question from my colleagues still haunts me: "aren't you afraid?" In truth, I was terrified. Sometimes I still am. Yet, in my bones I know that my value is no longer derived by the measure of the world around me. I felt there was something more important than holding onto my sense of power. I gained something profound when I let go of the job that once made me feel special. At some point, in pursuit of Christ, we will invariable have to let go of something we treasure, call it a loss, all because we believe in something worth so much more.

Rev. Jasper Peters

Jasper is a graduate of the Iliff School of Theology, and is a Provisional Elder in the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference.

Friday, February 19

Text: Psalm 27

Have you ever felt rejected? I'm not talking about minor rejection, from a club or a date. I'm talking about gut-level rejection that leaves you feeling broken and mired in grief.

That's what David is describing in this song. He says that he has been rejected in perhaps the most painful way possible on earth: *"My father and mother walked out and left me."* Whether he speaks literally or figuratively, that is a crushing statement. Thank God that's not the end of the story... *"But God took me in."*

God is the source of healing when we are broken and wounded at the depths of our being. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ embody this truth. David reminds us of that well of living water when he says there is only one thing that he cannot live without: *"I'm asking God for one thing, only one thing: to live with him in his house my whole life long."*

David is giving us both words of reassurance and a challenge. We are reassured to know that God is there for us in our most painful moments of rejection, ready to lift us up, dust us off, kiss us better. But David also reminds us that every human being needs that place of refuge in God's house. Who are we to stand in the way of that sanctuary? How can we help people to know that in the house of God, which we call home, they would be welcome?

Holy and loving God, thank you for welcoming us home with You. Strengthen our spines and open our hearts as we try to offer Your peace to others... especially those who are different from us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Rev. Clare Watson Chance

Clare is privileged to serve as the senior pastor of Avondale United Methodist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, a Reconciling Church.

Saturday, February 20

Text: Matthew 23:37-39

*"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets
And stones those who are sent to it!"*

Church, Church, the community of the faithful that falls short of God's holiness
Striking out at those who disagree
And casting verbal stones at those whose love we do not
understand.

*"How often have I desired to gather your children together
As a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
And you were not willing!"*

How I long to hold you, Church! How I long to gather my children together!
You are my flock – my chicks, my lambs,
And I want to hold you and care for you;
I want you to love one another and to hold each one's dignity
In a world filled with hurt,
Where different views are trivial
When differences obscure and destroy
The preciousness of human life!

"See, your house is left to you, desolate."

See, your lack of love leaves you divided and devastated.

*"For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say,
'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

I am with you, but you cannot see me
When you are filled with hateful speech
And determination to defend your own view
And destroy the other.

I am with you, but you cannot see me
Until you turn toward me and call my name
And bless my love-filled life;
I am the One who comes in the name of the Lord

The One who reveals to you the beauty of each life,
Created and loved by God!

God, have mercy!

Christ, have mercy!

God, transform us into a community of love

Gathered under your wings

As precious chicks – as children of God!

Mary Elizabeth Moore

Mary Elizabeth is Dean and Professor of Theology and Education, Boston University School of Theology, and a deacon in the California-Pacific Annual Conference.

Sunday, February 21

Text: Luke 9:28-38

Luke's narrative of what the CEB translation calls "Jesus Transformed" is a familiar story. In fact, we have coined a phrase that refers to such an experience: a mountaintop experience.

Music has been the medium through which I have experienced this sort of transformational moment. And I think that my face did shine. It felt that way. A thin place...in the midst of Mendelsohn's Elijah or Rutter's Gloria. When it happened to Jesus, it wasn't just his personal experience. Peter, James, and John saw it too. And they heard a message about Jesus that affirmed his identity and clarified his authority.

As we seek God's restorative and transforming presence in our General Conference, it seems very significant to me that Peter, James, and John are described as "sleepy" yet they have this mountaintop experience that clarifies Jesus's identity. Can a sleepy church hear God's voice clearly? Can General Conference be a *thin* place?

The events of Luke's full narrative involve two sons. In the first, God claims Jesus. "*This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him!*" God's powerful affirmation rings out. Secondly a father comes with a son who is possessed by a spirit. This father also fully claims his son and seeks his restoration to health. Jesus doesn't shun him or criticize him, but simply heals him. Both sons are empowered and transformed by the claim.

Let us pray that the 2016 General Conference will indeed be a mountaintop experience or a thin place. May all delegates clearly hear God's message that all persons are worthy of claiming! If the sleepy disciples could hear God's message, perhaps a sleepy church can also!

Let us pray that we are restored to one body, shining with the transforming presence of God.

Dr. Margaret Ann Crain

Margaret Ann is professor emeritus of Christian education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and deeply committed to advocating for the order of deacons and its focus on ministries of compassion and justice.

Monday, February 22

Text: Romans 4:1-12

Foreskin.
There. I said it.

A little desensitization may be in order. There's no avoiding that this text addresses the anatomical part that many males are inclined to cover. However, Romans 4 has less to do with a body part as it does with who is part of the Body.

Paul addresses a question that's older than Moses' toes, and yet painfully timeless: When it comes to Church, who's in and who's out? Who may fully participate in the Body, and who are pronounced ecclesiastical nobodies? Early on, this distinction was made by classifying people in terms of 'circumcised' and 'uncircumcised' (which depreciated women to another sub-category). It was a way of differentiating between Jews (the circumcised, bearers of the Covenant) and Gentiles (uncircumcised, those outside the Covenant).

Circumcision was essentially a way that occupied-Israel refused to assimilate into the predominate culture. The circumcised couldn't just 'blend in.'

The rite was meant to forge an identity. But practices intended to set us apart from others can become the thing we believe sets us above others. Soon, we treat them as 'other.'

Paul knew, since running into Jesus, the time-honored barriers that made people 'other' (outside the Covenant) were now crucified, dead and buried. He also knew it was time to take a fresh look at scripture.

Paul goes way back to Abraham, the patriarch with whom God established the Covenant with Israel. Yes, Abraham was circumcised. Yes, God "reckoned" Abraham as "righteousness." But not in that order!

Abraham was circumcised in Genesis 17, but was already pronounced "righteous" in Genesis 15 -- because that's the hour he first "believed." That's all it took for an "ungodly" one to be "reckoned" as "righteousness." Abraham trusted he was in right relationship with God -- just because God said so.

What would the Church look like if participation was based solely on this level of trust?

The church would no longer be the gathering place for folks who want to surround themselves with people who are just like them. Sunday services would lose its appalling designation as the most segregated place in America. And LGBTQ faithful would find room at the table - and in the pulpit. Paul argued for the community's full inclusion of outsiders branded as "ungodly" while insisting this is consistent with what God has been doing all along. God's very nature is to expand the circle - not to circle the wagons.

Rev. Bill Frisbie

Bill is a retired United Methodist minister in the Rio Texas Conference. He received his Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Texas and Masters of Divinity from Perkins School of Theology (SMU).

Tuesday, February 23

Text: Psalm 105

to be clear
being queer
in the church today
is not like wandering
lost in the wilderness

we know where we are

the unshakable trust
in Loving-Kindness
in Mercy in Justice
in Wisdom
does not have us doubt

the covenant is unbreakable

even though others
persecute, prosecute, and condemn
shutting doors
creating a remnant
in time and space

but the anointing has happened
the wonderful works have been done
a new creation has been born
here, today
in this
queer
body

I know who I AM

I AM the one created very good
I AM the one seeking mercy and justice
I AM the one promised a rainbow
I AM the one given a nation
I AM one

those that seek to divide
destroying unity
and conquering diversity
living in fear of
their boxes breaking
down and doors
being truly opened
will be
rebuked:

Do not harm my people.

Love one another.

As you love Me.

Rev. Terri Stewart

Terri is the Director of the Youth Chaplaincy Coalition and the online canoness at BeguineAgain.com.

Wednesday, February 24

Text: Luke 33:22-31

LGBTQ folks are door experts. We have memorized the illuminated outlines from inside closet doors, both waiting and fearing the day that door opens. We know the sound of slamming doors from our estranged homes, intolerant businesses, and discriminating places of employment. We know the pain of endlessly knocking our bloodied knuckles on barricaded doors to fight for our own affordable healthcare, safety in our communities, and basic needs in order to live.

These verses from Luke might remind us of those experiences. For they have been used from far too many from pulpits and pews to reshape our LGBTQ identities into the “straight and narrow” way of salvation. They have been used to shape our churches into heteronormative and cis-privileged distortions of God’s kin-dom coming into being. These narrow doors of the church have directly harmed so many of my queer siblings of faith that I believe it is time that they are taken off their hinges.

However, as Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem he too encountered many kinds of doors: some that were open wide to welcome him into homes and communities, and others that slammed shut as he passed by. While Jesus surprisingly advocates for a narrow door here in Luke, we see that his message is not directed to the outcast, the oppressed, or the marginalized. Instead, Jesus calls out to the Roman regime to strip itself of its bravado and hierarchy in order to fit through the narrow way to salvation where the oppressed already have arrived.

In God’s kin-dom, all that is needed is our authentic selves, not the means of power we have wielded over each other. In God’s kin-dom, we no longer have to hide behind closet doors, because we are invited to bring our entire selves to the journey towards wholeness. In God’s kin-dom, the narrow door is a call upon the church to leave behind all that gets in the way of being the presence of God’s radical love transforming the world.

Rev. Britt Cox

Britt serves as Associate Pastor at First United Church of Oak Park.

Thursday, February 25

Text: Revelation 2:8-11

As I considered today's reading, two words tied me down and would not relent.

Affliction. Poverty.

I couldn't escape their significance and I began to question how many of the people reading this have really drank deep from those wells. How many know what it is like to be hated, to be torn, to have nowhere to turn and no one to turn too. I question this, not because I hope it is so, but because those concepts are so integral to the life of those who are transgender. And because until you experience them, you will never understand exactly how much transgender people need the Church.

I am reminded of Jesus' words to the mother of James and John as she vied for her sons to have more prestige. "Are you able to drink of the cup I drink of?"

And I wonder again, is the Church ready for that? Can they come down into our affliction? Can they learn what it is to be hated? Can they earn their poverty with their grace?

And what would it look like for them to do so?

Do they know what would happen if some of us who have not known the loving touch of family in years were suddenly embraced as children?

Are they ready for the reality of our brokenness, these who worship a broken god?

And how much longer must we wait, how many more do we have to lose before we are worth it?

Dear and beloved Church, I am already a part of you and yet still I stand outside and knock.

But maybe I am unfair, maybe you cannot let us in, not until you understand.

So I ask you to consider for yourself:

"What do I know of Affliction? Poverty?"

Lord guide me in Your humility. Open my heart to the suffering of those who are beside me, and let this revelation of humanity birth compassion and not complacency. Amen

Alaina Kailyn

Alaina is a theologian, author, mother, and transgender woman.

Friday, February 26

Text: Revelation 3:1-16

Through the spirits and the stars I ask you to listen deep: God's wisdom is alive within.

May we open, accept and welcome LGBTQ+ people as they inspire us all to wake up.

May we strengthen what remains true about each other and ourselves.

May we hold tight to the idea of letting go of our narrow identities and begin to let die the exclusion of the past.

May we walk in completeness, continuing on together, united in the image of God.

May we strengthen what remains to be true and holy.

May our ears be blessed with truth and eyes with wide knowing.

Amen

Skye Aslaksen

Skye lives in Tuscon, Arizona and is blessed to be a Methodist.

Saturday, February 27

Text: Psalm 63:1-8

What burdens or joys are behind those earbuds and empty stares? As I seek to be mindful of my fellow Metro riders, how many are “thirsting” as the psalmist says? The woman with downcast eyes may simply have had a hard day at the office or she may have received a life-altering diagnosis at the doctor’s office. The couple exchanging a quick goodbye as one gets off the train may be longing to get pregnant or approved for an adoption.

Trust and praise come easily when times are good, but when the days are more challenging? How many of us can say: *“Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.”* (Psalm 63:3)

This is recognition of God’s love from deep in the pit, or perhaps on the other side, not a simple, sweet praise song. Time in the wilderness gets tiresome, but it can be a source of creativity and rearranging expectations. The Reconciling movement looks toward General Conference and thirsts for the Holy Spirit to usher in more inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church. Yet in the days we find ourselves, how are we staying focused on God and God’s faithfulness?

Lent is a particular time for self-examination, but in our Methodist tradition of social holiness, we must similarly reflect on the world around us. We are called not just to change ourselves as individuals, or even just “the church,” but we are called to change the world!

Using language from a resolution passed by the Baltimore-Washington Conference, a UM in West Virginia recently testified at a city council hearing in support of including sexual orientation and gender identity in an ordinance on nondiscrimination in housing and employment. Regardless of what happens at GC, we can all be more active in the public arena, and find our own ways to proclaim that God’s *“steadfast love is better than life!”*

T.C. Morrow

T.C. is Director of Finance & Operations at the National Religious Campaign Against Torture in Washington, DC.

Sunday, February 28

Text: Psalm 63:1-8

I used to rise early for morning prayer when I was in seminary at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. At 6:30 AM, a few of us would gather in the small Rustin Teaching Chapel to sing the morning prayer liturgy together. It was a discipline; a discipline that ushered me into a presence that *“satisfied as with a rich feast.”*

The morning prayer liturgies were repetitive—this was part of its glory. Each sung psalm, each recurring prayer, the acclamation of light, and the same hymns became like old dear friends. In a culture of immediacy, instant messaging, and information superhighways these old words, these worn-out psalms, these metered hymn-tunes from the 18th century, and a simple lit candle became accompaniment to life itself.

Through them, morning by morning, the poetics and melody of one sung psalm in particular played like a cantus firmus in the chaos of my mental living room; it still functions for me as a velvety cushion into which I fall, exhausted, in need—my soul thirsting, my flesh fainting for God alone. Psalm 63. I can hear it right now as I write it and that is such a gift.

It starts with the antiphon, *“In the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy...”* and then, one voice rising above all others, *“O God you are my God, and I long for you from early morning; my soul thirsts for you for you have always been my help...”* This psalm unabashedly narrates the soul’s honest and raw desire for God and for the deep and abiding joy that comes from God alone. It is nearly embarrassing when said or sung or contemplated in a world where we are invited to speed up not slow down, where we are shamed if we cannot “pick ourselves up by our bootstraps,” and where thirsting or fainting for God is cause for therapeutic alarm rather than spiritual communion.

And yet, the deepest and most affective moments, for me, have arisen at moments when my exhaustion with the world and my countless attempts at self-sufficiency have ended in a plea for help. This psalm, and the spirituality it confesses, is the antidote, the oasis, the cure for my soul that is like a “dry and weary land.” Why not just come out and say it? I am a sad person without the love and joy of my God and this psalm reminds me, once again, of God’s readiness to be in relationship and my deep need for one. In the shadow of your wings, I sing for you. Indeed. May it be so.

Matt Berryman

Matt serves as Executive Director at Reconciling Ministries Network and is a former pastor in The United Methodist Church.

Monday, February 29

Text: Romans 2:1-11

Many people choose to give up a vice for Lent: coffee, sweets, Facebook, etc. The idea, as I have always understood it, is that the effort to give up these things helps us to focus on all that Jesus gave up for his forty-day journey into the desert, and his preparation for the ultimate sacrifice.

I have practiced Lent this way, but it doesn't really work for me. My focus always tended to be on how many days were left until I could eat chocolate again, and so I gave up giving things up for a few years. Then, I took up the practice again, but this time, with a few differences.

I decided to give up behaviors that prevented me from walking God's path and replace them with positive behaviors, and, though I would start this practice at Lent, I would try to carry it with me throughout the rest of the year. Last year, I essayed to give up judging others, particularly focusing on all those little judgments, like "who wore it best" or "who accomplished the most at work" or "who is more generous of their time and talents?" It was incredibly freeing.

In addition to letting go of my judgment of others, I also let go of my own judgment of myself by comparison with others. Of course, as with so many resolutions, I got further from my goal throughout the year, so this Lent, when I read this passage from Romans, I was recalled to last year's Lenten intention. If we leave judgment to the omniscient Creator, we will be unencumbered by jealousy or fear of failure, and we are completely free to walk the wondrous path God has set for us.

Ruthanne Swanson

Ruthanne was raised in a UCC congregational church, but was drawn to Broadway UMC in Chicago, IL by their radical justice work, and now calls them part of her chosen family.

Tuesday, March 1

Text: Romans 2:12-16

It's an extraordinarily radical statement for the apostle Paul to make: “

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.”

For Paul's first-century Jewish audience, knowledge and observance of the law determined who was in and out with God. To claim that outsiders could “*do instinctively what the law requires*” threatened the entire religious order, no less than suggesting that some people of other faiths might embody Jesus better than many Christians.

In United Methodism and all of the Wesleyan tradition, we believe in the religion of the heart. We believe that the purpose of every moral boundary that we set for ourselves is to cultivate love of God and neighbor in our hearts. We don't think that God makes rules for the purpose of imposing authority and creating exclusive communities.

The implication of this belief in the ultimate importance of shaping the heart to be holy is that we measure our holiness not according to a legalistic adherence to rules but according to the virtues that our spiritual disciplines cultivate. We do not expect the Bible to give us an exhaustive set of rules for every possible life scenario. What we find in scripture is a way of life to emulate through living out the spiritual metaphors of taking up our crosses and putting on the resurrected life of Jesus.

What does it mean to be crucified and resurrected with Jesus in every aspect of my life? What do I need to let go so that I can embrace the love that wants me to be its vessel? I'm not looking to follow rules flawlessly; I'm looking for love to become my instinct and my law.

Morgan Guyton

Morgan is a UMC campus minister in New Orleans who blogs at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice>.

Wednesday, March 2

Text: Luke 13:18-21

“What is the kingdom of God like... to what shall we compare the kingdom of God?”

Those are the questions before us in today's Gospel reading. The answer is that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed ... like yeast mixed with flour.

I was skiing with my six-year-old nephew one afternoon. His mother had been with him in the morning. One of the children had seen his mom with him, and then me with him, so she asked him if I was his “other mom.” He said, “no, she's my aunt.” Then the two of them resumed their skiing after their matter-of-fact conversation. How I hope they will always naturally see the possibility of a family having many different forms. How I pray the seeds of inclusion sown into their innocent hearts will shape the world.

A pastor, struggling with the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church, was visiting the church I serve. A young woman he had known and loved as a teenager approached him and asked if he remembered her. He did and was joyful in being reunited with her. She proudly introduced him to her new wife. The newlyweds enthusiastically shared with him about how being in a church where they are more than welcomed, are also fully affirmed and included, enables them to live in and live out their faith.

Before he left, he said to me with heart-felt conviction, “keep providing a safe place where spiritual growth can happen.” The yeast of relationship, opening the door of a heart. The kingdom of God is found in the seeds of inclusion ... in the yeast of relationships.

When we live in that kingdom, lives are saved, the world is changed.

Rev. Jeanine Alexander

Jeanine is lead pastor at Minnetonka UMC in Minnesota.

Thursday, March 3

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:16

Sometimes we just get it wrong.

We cover up the true church with laws that segregate and cast out those of us deemed unworthy. Our church continually sins with harmful words, like "abomination" and "incompatible" that teach our children to hurt each other and even take their own lives in despair.

What we should know is that no one has to pass a test to receive God's love. That's it, sweet child...everlasting love is there waiting for you to just open your heart and accept the gift!

It's time for our church to shed the tired old skin of exclusion. It's time to let go of unhealthy regulations that separate us from each other and from God. Any law written by humanity to keep people out has an expiration date. But the covenant of love written on our hearts by God renews us eternally!

Joy L. Butler

Joy, @ReconcilingMom, is a stay-at-home parent in Texas living out her Christian family values by supporting the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in church and society.

Friday, March 4

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:6-15

As he often does, St. Paul, in this message to the Corinthians, postures several dichotomies i.e. faith vs. sight, in the body vs. away from the body, out of our mind vs. in our right mind.

Western European languages have inherited sentence styles and thinking that regularly position two concepts as oppositional. Thus, language is the transmitter that reinforces these often times oppressive scenarios. As you engage your next conversation with another, think about how many times your language positions two concepts in opposition to each other- one is deemed good and the other, bad; how many times do we insist on an either-or articulation of a scenario?

These dichotomies that are built-in to the way that we think about the world are inherently unwelcoming to queer persons who are unsettled by the binary. In my own Traditional Indigenous Maskoke culture, the queer individual is known as *envrkepv-huerv*, meaning “one who stands in the middle.” *Envrkepv-huerv* are unique and of great value to maintaining the balance in our communities- primarily because *envrkepv-huerv* can see beyond the constricting dichotomy that inherently creates an unhealthy imbalance.

St. Paul says that “*as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord.*” I would encourage us to step away from the androcentric, the human centered picture, and view this passage in a larger ecological framework. Our body is merely one organism that is inextricably connected to a web of many organisms created by God and hosted by the Earth Mother. We often forget that as human organisms, we too are a part of the balance of an ecosystem. Thus, it is only when we are at home with all of God’s creation, that we can experience God’s entirety.

If you are a part of or show support for the LGBTQ community, you’ve undoubtedly at one time or another been made to feel that you are “out of your mind.” Moreover, if you have remained a part of The UMC in the midst of violence directed toward LGBTQ persons, I would say you are certainly “out of your mind.” Nonetheless, committed to justice we remain, Paul’s message encourages us to know that our work is “for God.”

Marcus Briggs-Cloud

Marcus, an Indigenous Maskoke person from the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference and Tvlvhasse Etlvwv, is a scholar, musician, and activist.

Saturday, March 5

Text: Luke 15:1-10

If I try hard enough, I can manipulate scripture to fit my specific needs. I can write myself into the stories of our faith from any angle or time, and preach a sermon that is well received in my congregation. I can frame my own theology and experience to present myself as the lost sheep, one of many within the flock, or the shepherd who is searching. Such eisegetical manipulation is done by many of us when we read scripture.

However, the reality is that I often get away with this manipulation because of who I am in relation to others. I am a privileged, white, heterosexual male who can manipulate parts of scripture and place myself in the midst of its stories even when I have little to offer, often passing it off as a true proclamation of the Word.

This Lent I am committing to read scripture with my privilege as my hermeneutical lens. As privileged Christians, we need to realize how often we co-opt the message of Jesus for ourselves, leaving little room for the Other to be found in Christ's story. It is easy for privileged persons to preach sermons or teach bible studies while placing ourselves, or allowing others to place themselves, in the story as the shepherd or the lost sheep. To seek new growth outside of our comfort zone, we must try to envision ourselves as simply a part of the flock, waiting for Christ to bring back into the body those beloved people we have driven away.

How do we read scripture in a way that clearly allows for the Other to be center of the story? How do we learn to be comfortable with the reality that Jesus is not always talking to us, looking for us, or inviting us to the table? How can we co-create spaces of reconciliation by learning to wait and be silent, as the forgotten and exploited Others take center stage in the Gospel story?

Rev. Mitchell Boone

Mitchell is the pastor of White Rock United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. He is leading his congregation to reimagine its identity through creative uses of space within the church.

Sunday, March 6

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

I never felt more clearly called than when I entered youth ministry in 1992. For ten years, God blessed us with dedicated, passionate leadership, and our ministry grew to one of the largest in the state. After attending Perkins School of Youth Ministry, I was asked to teach and then chair the event. It was there I first realized there were others “like me,” passionately serving God, living at best with discretion, at worst in denial of who God created us to be.

It was there, too, that I became aware of the Reconciling movement when a colleague shared “Finishing the Journey,” a study by Northaven UMC. One contributor was Arkansas Bishop Richard Wilke, who co-authored Disciple Bible Study. Bishop Wilke wrote: “*I am amazed at my lifelong ignorance of homosexuality... I did not understand (or worry about) my energetic, popular youth leaders who did not date...*” Wow. My Bishop was talking about me. It was one of the most liberating moments of my life.

In his letter, Paul calls the church in Corinth to “*regard no one from a worldly point of view,*” but isn’t that exactly what we do when we allow fear and bias to exclude anyone from living as full members of the body of Christ? How many, like I, have abandoned our ministry or church because we cannot believe that God would demand a life of secrecy or denial?

I’m proud of my United Methodist heritage and I’m a better person for having been raised in a church that preaches mercy, justice and grace. But, like so many, I have felt marginalized by my church. This season of Lent, it’s my prayer that I live as “Christ’s Ambassador” and open my heart and mind to the marginalized around me. Perhaps then our church’s doors will follow.

Dwight Curry

Dwight, who served in youth ministry from 1992 through 2004 at FUMC, Fort Smith, AR and at Perkins School of Youth Ministry in Dallas, TX, now owns a hospitality business and has remained active in his local church as a volunteer.

Monday, March 7

Text: Psalm 53

During times of great heartache and opposition it is easy to say “*There is no God.*” For it is often easier to turn away, back down and play dumb to one’s surroundings than it is to stand up for what we believe to be true. This was true in the case of King David’s time and is certainly true in today’s world.

During the next few months the call for LGBTQ justice will be reiterated leading up to and during our United Methodist General Conference.

During these times, keeping our faith and keeping our hearts open to all, including those whose hearts are not open, will be hard, but luckily we have God! So, as we grow closer to General Conference, let us not be devoured or turned away, but let us be dauntless. Let us take shelter in our God. Let us surround ourselves in God’s love. Let us always remember that God created each of us exactly as we are.

So Lord, as we go through our day to day life and in the months leading up to General Conference, give us the strength and love to say you are ever present. Even when it would be much easier to turn away or to proclaim that you are gone. Give us the strength to rejoice in your name and to be glad in your presence. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Oakley Neel

Oakley is a 16 year old Bishop Kelley High School sophomore in Tulsa, Oklahoma where they enjoy theatre, art, and working with those with special needs at their church. One day they hope to be a pastor and missionary in The United Methodist church.

Tuesday, March 8

Text: Leviticus 25:1-19

Lent is a time for rituals. Sometimes rituals grow tedious and add to the demands of our lives. But Leviticus prescribes rituals for renewal for all of creation in the laws of the Sabbath and the year of Jubilee.

In his book *Sabbath as Resistance*, Walter Brueggemann locates the Sabbath in the context of Egypt's coercive labor practices of anxious production. The economic situation of Egypt was such that laborers who produced wealth never held it in their hands, yet the wealthy urged greater production on the backs of poor workers and slaves. God's commandment of the Sabbath released the Israelites from this captivity. The Sabbath required rest from work, and therefore limited the amount of production and labor the Israelites could do. The Sabbath halted the corrupt system of production that harmed God's people.

In her piece, "An Equal Measure of Grace," Rev. Layton Williams discusses the unfair standards queer clergy place on themselves as a result of heterosexism in the church. Queer clergy must work extra hard not to appear as inept or sinful as conservatives make them out to be, just as black people must work harder than white people to gain credibility in a racist world, and just as women must work twice as hard as men for the same job for which they'll wind up receiving less pay. Such constraints produce a disproportionate amount of anxiety and exhaustion for the marginalized.

But God orders a reversal of such a world order. God's Sabbath liberates all of creation together with a time when all can resist the structures of this world that overwork us, exploit us, and try to keep us from seeing any of the fruit we've produced. God's Sabbath orders us to find the time in our lives when we can rest and resist. God's Sabbath is a ritual of renewal.

Elizabeth Evans

Elizabeth hails from Wichita, KS and is an MDiv and MTS student at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary seeking ordination in The United Methodist Church.

Wednesday, March 8

Text: Luke 9:10-17

The stories of our faith traditions get lost in a maze of mummy gauze and distortions by romantic whitewashing to the point it's difficult, if not impossible, to grasp the depth and breadth of such an experience as Jesus feeding well over 5000 people in the desert.

How astounding to witness thousands of folks fed from a tiny bit of two little dried up fish and five biscuits. Jesus was trying to get away with the disciples to discuss a few things but had spent much of yet another day healing the sick. Late in the day when the "deacons" and "elders" said why don't you "send the crowd away" to get lodging and food elsewhere, Jesus said, "You feed them." This was already an unbelievable administrative nightmare, you know they weren't all getting along like a Sunday School class of kids in 1955. Yet tried and true leadership skills came into play as thousands were gathered into smaller groups and invited to have a seat.

Jesus, taking a meager snack, blessed it, broke it and then broke it some more and gave it to his disciples who distributed the food to everyone and there were still twelve baskets of food left over.

This story of God's mercy and love is also one of the greatest images of the living church today; folks, hurting and hungry, gathered to find Jesus, being healed and fed. The world we live in now is still looking for healing and wholeness. Miracles happen when we, the church, find our voice of compassion and love.

Should we, in our bickering and complaining about "not having enough," just send the world away to be filled elsewhere? We have enough. We have what the world needs. We have Jesus. We have God's grace and mercy. We have enough to tell the administrators of Our Church that we don't have to exclude anyone or hold back on God's love because, there is enough. There is enough love, there is enough food, there is enough healing for everyone. And there will be leftovers.

Grace Cox-Johnson

Grace lives and works in Kansas City, MO, creating and teaching fiber art for worship settings throughout the greater church.

Thursday, March 10

Text: Psalm 126

Above my desk hangs a handmade sign: Appalachian in Exile. I made it a few years back for a witness to the Environmental Protection Agency's allowances for the mountaintop removal method of coal extraction. You see, I come from mountains and valleys, hills and hollers. But for the past 16 years, I've lived outside of Appalachia. Some might say by my own choice. I'd point to a lack of economic opportunity and less than friendly environments for queer people (although this is changing).

The words of the psalmist give hope: *"Those who go forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."* When the faithful were exiled to Babylon, their hope was in a day of great return. Do you know how many faithful have been exiled from The United Methodist Church?

When I survey my friend and acquaintances (a very unscientific survey, but a survey nonetheless), I find at least 150 names of those who have been exiled from the Church. Some transferred to a denomination who affirmed their calling as queer people of God; others simply left Church altogether. There are days when I pray that The United Methodist Church can have one huge welcome back party. Oh, how I hope that "those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy!"

But I know it's never that easy. As an Appalachian in Exile, I know how difficult it will be when the time comes for me to return home. The land, the people, and the ethos are different than what my time in exile has shown me. My friends and family have been shaped by the systems of oppression at play in Appalachia in ways that I have not. And for some, we have traded one oppressor for another.

The same holds true for LGBTQ persons in The United Methodist Church. Some of us have found safety in exile. Some of us have found safety in the systems that oppress us. And others have found vocation as living witnesses to the powers and principalities of a Church that continues to seek exclusion to maintain false unity. It may not be easy for us to return home - to the places and structures we hold dear - but with God's grace, we continue the work so we can bring the harvest home, a harvest filled with eventual joy and hope and love.

Chett Pritchett

Chett is the executive director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action and lives in Washington, DC.

Friday, March 11

Text: Psalm 126

What do you dream about that our political reach prevents us from doing or supporting?

Do you dream of a day that undocumented immigrants will have full healthcare and protection under the law?

Do you dream that transgender prisoners will receive the care they need and are free from violence and harassment?

Do you dream of a day that foreign aid is increased to end global poverty, disease, and the water crisis?

Do you dream of a day when it is safe to be black?

Do you dream of a day that our Palestinian brothers and sisters and siblings are equal to our beloved sisters, brothers, and siblings in Israel?

"When The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;"

"Then it was said among nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced."

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord..."

In God's vision, this does not mean the rich; this is even often beyond the middle class. This plea is for low-income people and for anyone facing economic exploitation.

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like in the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves."

With God's help, may we make it so.

Daniel Crusius

Daniel is a United Methodist and loves to sing!

Saturday, March 12

Text: John 11:45-57

In fear, we already give up our temple and nation.

We become an obscured version of ourselves concerned only with self-preservation, urging others towards doing the same – towards sacrificing one another's liberation for the sake of preserving our temple and our nation. What is this temple and nation in the hands of fear anyway?

They become bent on preserving themselves, self-focused, centers of scarcity that tempt us to uplift our own agendas instead of building with one another and seeing the ways that our communities, and our struggles, are interconnected.

I remember Jennifer Laude, who lived at this intersection. Brutally murdered because she was trans. Brutally silenced because unequal, colonial US-Philippines relationships urge injustice upon the poor and Brown, tearing apart our bodies and earth, for the sake of exploitative economic and military agreements.

Colonialism is not frozen in history or socio-political relationships. Colonialism lives on in colonized bodies and minds. But as many generations have lived under colonization, there have been generations rising up and resisting, reclaiming our bodies and minds.

How wonderful if we could join together generations worldwide, this Movement for liberation of all people? What stops us?

When we live into faith versus fear, we resist the colonial culture of divide and conquer – we can stand strong having faith that when we build alliances and make connections that our own liberation will not be overlooked. We can live knowing that connecting our struggles will manifest in our collective liberation. Then we can be our Whole selves, never having to choose between our ethnic-racial identity, sexual identity, gender identity, or any other identity that we carry unapologetically.

We can resist the colonial, Empire goal of making us single-issue people, of making us incomplete. We can be the restored, transformed, Whole Creation that God created us to be.

Rev. Jeanelle Nicolas Ablola

Jeanelle serves as Lead Pastor at Pine UMC – the first API Reconciling Congregation in the US – is co-chair of the Cal-Nev Philippine Solidarity Task Force, member of the Network on Religion and Justice for API LGBTQ people (NRJ), member of the Cal-Nev Annual Conference's Advocacy & Justice Committee and Methodist Federation for Social Action California-Nevada Chapter (MFSA) awarded her with the 2014 Bishop Leontine T.C. Kelly Peace and Justice Award.

Sunday, March 13

Text: Psalm 126 & Isaiah 43:16-21

During seminary, my roommate and I began a practice we would later christen “doorway theology.” Time after time, one would appear in the other’s doorway. “Do you have a minute? I need...” We met in our questions and longings. Together, we talked human suffering and divine power. Structural racism, feminism, and white privilege. Queer theology and our latest disastrous/delightful dates. Incarnation and sacramentality. Movements of liberation, and histories of oppression. Reparations and deportations. Truths and testimonies, demanding witness. That which breaks us open. That which matters most.

We could have moved to the comfort of a couch, but there was something ineffably holy about holding these encounters in doorways, in thresholds. Thresholds are thin spaces, thick with feeling, where we encounter G-d and each other more readily, more honestly, more fully.

Psalm 126 and Isaiah 43:16-21 might be read as threshold texts. The psalm was sung by people crying out: praising, pleading, grieving, giving thanks. The context was exile, estrangement. Restoration sown in tears, but reaped with shouts of joy. In Isaiah, the prophet’s proclamation promises the impossible: a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. The context was captivity, wilderness. Yet liberation is springing forth. The impossible becoming perceivable.

We do not all know, really, exile and occupation. But perhaps we all know how loss, grief, isolation, shame, and despair can hold us captive, utterly convinced that nothing joyful, just, holy, or good can possibly be/come, again. 15th c theologian Nicholas of Cusa nicknamed God *posse ipsum*, possibility itself. *Posse ipsum* invites us to persist. Persist in love that responds, restores, revives. Love that bears with. Love that moves us to laughter and tears. Love that gravitates toward thin spaces, thick with feeling, where we encounter G-d and each other more readily, more honestly, more fully.

Rev. Anna Blaedel

Anna is a campus minister, phd student in theology, and queer UM discontent, whose spiritual practices include the sacrament of brunch, sharing silence with strangers and beloveds, waking up before dawn, walking in the woods, and riding the subway.

Monday, March 14

Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

When I was much younger, there were times when I was pretty annoying. I would pester my brother until he turned to me in anger and took a swing at me. Never hard enough to hurt anything except my feelings, but a resolute “get out of my way” gesture. This is what I think of when I hear the word “provoke.” It is a strong word describing actions meant to cause a negative reaction more damaging than my brother’s. One dictionary defines “provoke” as “to deliberately make someone annoyed or angry.”

The scripture passage for today uses the word “provoke” in a very unconventional way. It links the word with the very positive Christian virtues of love and good deeds. The author of Hebrews turns the meaning and intent of the word “provoke” a full 180 degrees, to remind those who follow Jesus that by our deliberate actions, we must encourage others to be life-giving, affirming and uplifting.

What must we do to provoke that kind of loving, peaceful living? That is asking much of us. In the face of violence, hatred, and evil we must become even more resolute to live our lives faithfully. In spite of words and actions that exclude others in the name of the Church, we must not cease to witness to the Gospel message of Jesus’ invitation to all persons to full participation in the body of Christ.

One more definition to ponder. The word “provoke” is derived from the Latin for “to call forth.” This means that because of the way we live, we call forth from others certain values or virtues. In other words, a life well-lived inspires others. May our lives call forth from others an all-inclusive love for everyone in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Robert T. Hoshibata

Bishop Bob, consecrated in 2004, serves as the resident bishop of the Phoenix Area.

Tuesday, March 15

Text: Psalm 20

Do you see the dialogue between the two halves of Psalm 20?

The first: a blessing, filled with aspiration, so that the listener might find protection in God.

The second: a hefty vote of confidence in God's grace, a declaration of God's infinite power.

The first: may God send you help. The second: God is greater than chariots and horses.

Do you see the conversation?

It is one that I—as both a person of faith and an activist—find myself having again and again.

The first is a voice of blessing; the second, trust. They are perhaps the most important voices to keep in balance in the high-tightrope walk that is being an agent of social change.

Let's go in reverse: what does it mean for an activist to trust? It means to allow our faith to do what secular activists have a very difficult time articulating. It means to say that God has won. Love has won. There is nothing that any power can do to become greater than God—no empire to be built, no weapon to be invented, no war to be fought. Love wins, and the powers of this world today are just as helpless as the Roman empire scrambling to explain a resurrected Jesus. The infinite worth of all of God's children is secured, and that simply cannot be stripped, shot, or beaten out of us.

But then again, there is also the first part of Psalm 20, the blessing. If we are so confident in what God is capable of (à la v. 6-9), why do we need to bless anyone? Why do we need to pray that God send down help, when we already know that God has taken care of things in unimaginable ways? Isn't that like asking the sky to turn blue when the sun rises? Why waste our breath?

What the Psalm teaches us is that we still have a role in this world. Faith in God does not mean sitting back and letting "God handle it." Rather, we have the incredible ability to bless people and to bless the earth. When things are going wrong, God looks to be people of faith and ask, "Over there! Could you run there and be a blessing there?"

My friends, let us go out in the world and bless—lest we fall apathetic in a world crying for action. And let us also trust in God, so that we never think that we are doing this work alone. Amen.

Rev. Tyler Sitt

Tyler Sitt is pastor of New City Church, APlaceToStart.church

Wednesday, March 16

Text: Luke 18:31-34

When I was eight, I told my older cousin that I was going to study law at Hillman College.

Her reply was priceless: "Boy, Hillman ain't no real college! It was based on several historically black colleges and universities, such as Spellman and Howard. Hillman ain't real!"

As I walked away, all I could get myself to think was, "How dare she lie on Hillman! She must've applied and got rejected!"

No matter if you are eight or thirty-eight, few of us readily accept the possibility that the world we bought into may not be the world as it truly exists.

As I consider this passage in Luke, I am baffled by the fact that the disciples understood 'nothing' and 'did not grasp' anything Jesus said about being arrested, beaten, mocked, and killed.

What was it about Jesus sharing the plain details concerning his upcoming illegal trial, struggle with police forces, and lynching that caused the disciples to collectively declare they understood nothing our Brother was trying to tell them?

How many church elders "do not understand" the Black Lives Matter Movement because their pension plans are tethered to monolithic denominations beholden to the dominating interests of the ruling white majority?
How many seminarians "do not grasp" the sacramentality of trans flesh because that is not what will move them along the ordination process?

How many of us are willing to admit that our inability to understand the hard truths of God may not be rooted in our "fidelity to the Scriptures" but, rather, in a shared un-willingness to sacrifice the false peace offered by the rulers of this present age?

How long will it take us to understand that A Different World need not be a wrong world?

James Howard Hill, Jr.

James enjoys eating California Sushi Rolls (without cucumbers), researching African-American Religio-Political Thought, and lobbying his local politicians to fix broken gas pumps that stop every 15 cents.

Thursday, March 17

Text: Hebrews 2:1-9

The Book of Hebrews reminds us that God is most present not in the realm of angelic perfection and beauty but in the messy human struggle for “*the coming world*.” (Heb 2:5)

The angelic realm is pure, harmonious, full of glory. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of the angelic world where there is no racism, no anti-semitism, no sexism, no heterosexism, no classism, none of the oppressions we wrestle with here.

But God did not send Jesus to be born into the angelic world.

Jesus did not come for the sake of the angels but for us. (Heb 2:16) It is not the angels God has entrusted with the future to come. God has subjected the coming world to humanity, to us, imperfect and broken as we are. (Heb 2:8) When we get tired because progress seems so slow, maybe Hebrews can help us remember that in the midst of our very human struggle for justice, inclusion, and love is where the Presence of God is thickest. This struggle is where we come closest to the atoning work of Christ ... not in the realm of the angels but in our human struggle against the stubborn oppressions within and around us.

As General Conference approaches and we wish it would be a time of angelic harmony, peace and understanding, Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, became perfect through suffering. (Heb 2:10) The perfected world and church we long for comes only through struggle.

Later in Hebrews the writer encourages us “*to not grow weary or lose heart*” by remembering that “*we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*” who have persevered. (Heb 12:1-3) So when the struggle feels frustrating, hopeless, even demeaning, we know we are where God is moving most profoundly.

LGBTI United Methodists and allies in the midst of the struggle, may Hebrews help us remember we are part of a great cloud of witnesses who will encourage generations to come.

Rev. Dean Snyder

Dean is a retired pastor who lives on the eastern shore of Maryland.

Friday, March 18

Text: Psalm 31:9-16

Have you ever been that person others run or hide from? You know whom I'm talking about...depressed, scary, sad or even worse, someone so chipper that your nerves work overtime to keep up with all the excitement. I think there are times when we are on both sides of this conundrum. And at present, I resonate with the Psalmist who speaks of being depressed.

I have a predilection for being a bit cynical or brooding, so when advent and lent come around, I'm in my element. The problem with staying in this emotional place for much more than 40 days can lead to the place the Psalmist is lamenting, and I can't help but feel like I've been stuck here for way longer than 40 days.

But here's the thing - even when I'm in this place, I know I'm not alone. I may feel alone and sometimes even believe I'm alone. I am never alone. Never. You are never alone. Never. In the deepest, intense, darkest nights of the soul, we are never alone....

Mark Miller composed a haunting anthem a few years ago entitled, "I Believe." The lyrics are from these words found etched on a wall in Germany after the Holocaust:

I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining.

I believe in love, even when I don't feel it.

I believe in God, even when [God] is silent.

May these words and the words of the Psalmist give you hope of never being alone amidst the depressed moments of life:

But me? I trust you, Lord! I affirm, "You are my God." My future is in your hands. Don't hand me over to my enemies, to all who are out to get me! Shine your face on your servant; save me by your faithful love! (Psalm 39:14-16)

Kim Chapman

Kim Chapman is a musician and worship designer. She is a lover of life, art, architecture, music, nature, John Wesley and Jesus. She lives in Northern Illinois with her books, drums, and assorted Mac gadgets.

Saturday, March 19

Text: Luke 22:42-44

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." Luke 22:42

According to Luke, these are the words Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives just moments before his betrayal. Puzzling, aren't they? Was Jesus afraid? Apparently so, as Luke continues:

"In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." (Vs. 43-44).

So, Jesus was scared of the impending trial and its likely outcome - punishment by death. I know that fear to a lesser degree. But I'm human and Jesus is the Messiah. Superheroes aren't supposed to be fearful, are they? How can we explain this paradox? Some scholars are convinced that Luke's statement in vs. 43-44 is not authentic; that's why it is placed in parentheses in most bible translations.

Others suggest that the term "anguish" should not be understood as "fearful." New Testament scholar Sharon Ringe, for instance, explains "anguish" from the realm of athletics: Jesus was "sweating" from mentally preparing for what was coming.*

But the fact that Jesus asked for "the removal of the cup" suggests that he was fearful indeed. And that's OK - inspiring actually! It makes Christianity more relate- able. It encourages us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus' ministry of peace and justice.

As we follow our conscience and take a stand, it's natural to experience confrontation and even fear. If we do, we're in good company with Jesus.

Our fear does not express weakness. There is nothing shameful about expressing our fear in prayer; God gets it. And finally, it's OK to boldly ask God to save us.**

Jesus did, and though his request wasn't granted, he received the courage needed for the greatest Act of Love in history. Be encouraged, stand up for justice even when facing threats. It's not easy, but Jesus shows the path from fear to earnest prayer to the guts it takes to change this world.

Rev. Frank Schaefer

Frank is serving as pastor at University UMC in Isla Vista, California and is featured in the recent documentary, "An Act of Love."

*Sharon H. Ringe: Luke, Westminster John Knox Press; 1st edition (November 1, 1995) p. 266

**Luke, Volume 2: A Feasting on the Gospels: Feasting on the Word Commentary, edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis, E. Elizabeth Johnson, Westminster John Knox Press (November 19, 2014), p. 292

Passion Monday, March 20

Luke 22:14-23:56

A mother of a transgender child responds to her judgmental neighbor:

this sadness I feel
is for you sad one
you are so lost
yet want to save me

this anger I feel
is for you angry one
your screams suffocate
your silent stillness

this loss I feel
is for you lost one
your call still beckons
yet I embrace mine

this confusion I feel
is for you confused one
you believe the illusion
that we are not equals

this concern I feel
is for you concerned one
you try to separate us
yet our source is the same

this calm I feel
in spite of you crazed one
you search frantically
and only find your own fear

this love I feel
is for you God's beloved
you hate those like me
who accept their journey

Lorena Corey

Lorena is a mother, activist, founder of "Pinwheels," a singer, and a voice coach.

Holy Monday, March 21

Text: Isaiah 42:1-9

Reading this first “servant song” of Isaiah, we relate his message to our own individual lives and to our movement to transform the world by living out the Gospel’s teachings of grace, love, justice and inclusion for all of God’s people within The UMC and our world.

In his prophetic role, Isaiah faithfully and forcefully proclaimed God’s truth confronting the people and their leaders with God’s commands and promises. As the voice of God, Isaiah begins by introducing my servant, whom I uphold, have chosen, endowed with the Spirit, in whom I delight and the one who will bring justice to the nations. As Easter approaches, we see Isaiah’s prophecy fulfilled in God’s Servant-Messiah, Jesus, in whom we are freely justified by grace. As individuals and a movement, we follow Christ and are God’s servant. We are upheld and chosen by God, endowed with the Spirit, and the Creator does delight in each of us having been fearfully and wonderfully made. We too, in faithfulness are called to bring justice.

During this General Conference we will boldly proclaim; be a forceful witness to; and faithfully work to bring forth the entire LYNC Vision. Isaiah reminds the servant to persist with unfailing endurance, even under oppression, until the mission of justice is complete.

Isaiah says the islands put their hope in his law and as Christians during Easter we celebrate our hope in the risen, Servant-Messiah, Jesus. In 2012 we put our hope in Biblical Obedience and in 2016 we place hope in General Conference. The prophet says God makes the servant a light for the Gentiles to open eyes that are closed and to free the captives.

I pray we are a light leading others to Christ and closed eyes are opened this General Conference bringing forth justice and inclusion.

Giselle Lawn

Giselle is a member of the Reconciling Congregation, St Mark UMC in Atlanta, and a transgender woman, who serves on the RMN board and is a member of the UMATI leadership team.

Holy Tuesday, March 22

Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

I am an extrovert by day, so I am always inviting people into conversation. Since most people, particularly in the South, have been trained in the reciprocity of dialogue, when I make an inquiry, the same one is made in return. It doesn't take long, however, to realize that in many instances, the other party is only asking questions to determine in which category I should be placed. He has already summed up parts of me based on my physical appearance. Now he is listening for more information that will help him affix a label. I don't take it personally. Lots of people do it. It's a by-product of the social climate in the world in which we live.

The majority of people today are only concerned with labels. Black. Woman. Fat. Ugly. Gay. Poor. Angry. Lesbian. Illiterate. Homeless. Unemployed. Prisoner. Transgender. Aggressive. Lazy. Thug.

Conversations are no longer used to capture a glimpse of another person's heart. It's all about labels which is unfortunate because the only thing labels do is define how we mistreat our neighbors. The more we dislike the label of another person, the more harsh our behavior toward our siblings. That seems to be the way of this world. But, it doesn't have to be.

Labeling people doesn't have to be a bad thing. God is a Labeler. God calls us many names: Strong. Honorable. Important. Light. Savior.

Then, let us strive to follow God's example in our daily interactions with each other, that we may treat one another graciously, mercifully, lovingly. After all, the one label that sums up the whole of each person created as a member of the Human family is "Good."

Rev. Dr. Denise Donnell

Denise is the Senior Faith Organizer for the Human Rights Campaign in Little Rock, Arkansas where she is working as an ally to the LGBT community, advocating for the total liberation of all God's children that we may all live the abundant life to which we have been called.

Holy Wednesday, March 23

Text: Psalm 70

"The State of Texas has refused to listen to God's children"

These words may seem like they came from the mouth of a preacher or evangelist down here in the South. In fact, they came from Licho Escamilla, a person who was executed on October 14, 2015. My heart gently wept as I read those words for the first time. It was just weeks before his pending execution that I spoke with a United Methodist minister who knew Licho's family and shared the agony and pain the family was experiencing and anticipating.

During this Lenten season, we will soon read the story of Jesus' crucifixion. For some, Good Friday can be the toughest day as we imagine the pain and torture Jesus endured. Jesus' words on the Cross remind me of these words in Psalm 70, profusely begging for God's mercy. And yet there's a stark difference, for David he begged for mercy for himself, while Jesus begged for mercy for those next to him on crosses.

Make no mistake, we may not be in the business of crucifying Jesus in modern times, but we are still crucifying folks who resemble the other two persons on the crosses. I remember last year when I was speaking with an attorney from ACLU after he spoke of the progress being made in abolishing the death penalty. His last words inspire me still, "When we abolish the death penalty, it will be because Methodists led the way."

May we be followers of Jesus who seek justice and work towards collective liberation and life for all!

Jason Redick

Jason works for Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty and has many other interests to fight for justice in and outside The United Methodist Church.

Maundy, Thursday, March 24

Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

When I was in seminary, I attended a Maundy Thursday foot washing service in the chapel on campus. As part of the service, professors were washing the feet of their students. I was directed to the station where an older African-American professor who commanded tremendous respect, had been a faith leader since the civil rights movement and was a person that I held in very high esteem was washing feet. He shouldn't be washing my feet, I should be washing his feet, I thought to myself as I approached the basin. Nonetheless, he bent down and began to pour warm water over my feet, wiped them down and dried them off with a towel in his lap. I felt ashamed seeing him stooped before me with all of the uncomfortable dynamics of race, age, gender and orientation embodied in him offering the same ritual that Jesus offered to his disciples. I felt a strange mix of confusion, vulnerability, humility and gratitude as I walked back to my pew and reflected on the meaning of this very personal and intimate experience.

Foot washing to me is a reminder of the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf by those who have come before us. So many people, including this professor, have sacrificed much and worked hard to bring about a world that is better for me and for all who have felt marginalized in some way. Jesus invites us on this Maundy Thursday to receive the gift of God's unconditional love and to live out that love in service to others.

Rev. Josh Noblitt

Josh Noblitt is Minister of Social Justice and Evangelism at Saint Mark UMC in Atlanta.

Good Friday, March 25

Text: Psalm 22

Forsaken... I know this feeling.

Most LGBTQ people do.

The church causes us to feel this way when discriminatory provisions are enforced at the expense of our humanity. When our district superintendents and bishops tell us to wait, or throw in our face, "That's what *The Discipline* says," we are put to the cross of institutionalism.

For those of us LGBTQ United Methodists, at least the few of us who are left, we do indeed feel forsaken by our church.

But Good Friday will give way to Easter; death to life; exclusion to abundant welcome. The morning will come when all God's children will shake the forsaken feeling and know through every ounce of our being that The UMC is our church too.

LGBTQ persons will bring the light of resurrection.

Rev. Sara Thompson Tweedy

Sara is on staff at Memorial UMC in White Plains, NY, serves in extension ministry, and is the Chair of Methodists in New Direction (MIND), an LGBTQ advocacy organization in the New York Annual Conference. She is married to Kristin Marcell and is the mother of Max and Rowan.

Holy Saturday, March 26

Text: Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16

Dear God of Inclusion, God of Love, God of Justice and God of all,

We pray that you listen to the cries of our hearts, Oh Lord. We cry out for justice in our communities and acceptance in our homes and churches.

We pray that you change the judgmental hearts of your people. Grant those who are hurting the strength to carry on. Allow your love to mend and heal the precious hearts that have been broken, torn and abused. Allow your sweet peace to rest among the lives in turmoil caused by a lack of acceptance and understanding. Transform your churches, Dear God, and let them not be buildings of condemnation but sanctuaries of love and of acceptance of your children.

Bless the hearts of those who are yearning to belong in your Kingdom. Teach us all to love without discrimination and without judgment. Let our lights shine brightly in the dark places. Teach us to live and exist in unity as you have created us.

Guide us to speak up for the voiceless and to stand up for those who are facing injustices. As we push towards inclusion and justice we pray that your love breaks down every barrier that pushes back against us. We pray these things with pure hearts of love and gratitude for the blessings, inclusion and justice that is to come. Amen.

Rhys Caraway

Rhys is a queer black man of faith.

Easter Sunday, March 27

Text: Luke 24:1-12

The first to learn Christ had risen was a class of people that weren't allowed in the Temple and were deemed "unclean" every month. They were an unordainable group, treated as second class by their religious community: they were women.

An angel shows up to this sexual/gender minority group and tells them the great news, but when they go and share this wonderful news with the men they are written off. Like other groups in The UMC, like Richard Allen, like the people of MARCHA, like LGBT Methodists in 1972, like the people of NFAAUM. These groups know how the Marys feel to receive good news from the Savior, that they too are loved and whole and included in this important Christian narrative, only to be shut down when they share this great news as the first preachers.

Like so many people in the church, the women in this text are not believed, they are not heard; they are shrugged off and ignored. They are affirmed in their "sacred worth" but not treated as fully whole and trustworthy. Not until Peter (a member of the dominant group) goes to verify their tale, do others start to believe. Little has changed in our faith.

For years LGBT Methodists told our stories, but it wasn't until those with racial, gender, cis, and heterosexual privilege started saying, "Perhaps these gays are being used by God" that others started to give credence to our voices.

The promise of Easter is that Christ is with us all and that in being with us he includes us in the narrative. He sees us as loveable, as sacred, as trustworthy. He knows our stories are not "idle tales" but part of his story. And no matter how much we are written off, may we keep proclaiming the gospel we know to be true: We are loved! No one can separate us from the God who is Justice, who is A Full Embrace, whose message of liberation cannot be put to death. He is risen!

Jarell Wilson

Jarell is a senior at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary seeking ordination as an Elder in The UMC.



Reconciling Ministries Network extends its deep gratitude to all who contributed to *A Season of Becoming*. The richness of this resource is entirely rooted in the diversity of voices represented here – a small glimpse of the gifts of God incarnated across race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious vocations.

If you feel compelled to express your gratitude for this resource, please consider making a donation to Reconciling Ministries Network in honor of one of the contributors at rmnetwork.org/give.

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